



THE SPIRIT OF LOVE

Saugatuck beverage boutique sprung from romance

By ANDREA KENNEDY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB ROZYCKI

I HATE LIQUOR STORES. I can't help but cringe when I walk into a musty, cramped hovel with a shopkeep stationed behind the register and stacks of uninspired bottles. I yearn for more direction (and décor) than their neon signs scribbled with Sharpies (and fake grapevines) can offer. Lucky for folks like me, Saugatuck Grain + Grape is everything those spots are not.

"Before we opened, we made a conscious decision to not look like any other liquor store out there," says Jeff Marron, who runs Saugatuck Grain + Grape with Mimi McLaughlin. "We wanted to be more like your living room."

Or, perhaps, more like their living room. Marron and McLaughlin have been a couple for more than three years. They opened Saugatuck Grain + Grape together in 2010, filling it with not only choice wine, beer and spirits but also reflections of themselves, their relationship, their living space.

"We marry our interests together," McLaughlin says. "We both love to go antiquing and we just keep adding stuff to it over time. It is very sort of homey."

A 1973 cornflower blue bicycle greets guests as they walk in the door and a red '62 model sits in the window with a basket full of wine bottles. A vintage washing machine gets packed with ice and old-school beer cans in the summer while old-fashioned stoplights are posted around the shop (a gift from Marron's father, who

was a Darien cop). Vignettes and tableaux around their roomy shop feature the couple's own goods, from copper vessels and candles to quirky cocktail shakers and a copy of "The Wine Bible." A full-wall chalkboard mural by Manhattan graffiti artist Enrico Miguel Thomas depicts the Westport Metro-North station just across the street. There's room to look, to walk, to breathe, to admire, to chat and, of course, to drink.

"Most people say it feels like coming to a personal cocktail party," McLaughlin says. "People just like to hang around here — a lot."

A bar it's not, but Friday nights SG+G, as it's known, holds weekly tastings, often tapping into McLaughlin's wine expertise and Marron's spirit smarts for bourbon, beer, bitters and barrel aging. A more than 20-year industry vet, Marron creates his own concoctions and shares "Musings + Recipes" on the SG+G blog (complete with Monty Python references).

"It's about knowledge and education," McLaughlin says. "That really transcends the store, which makes us even better. We're all about personal service — really touching the customer."

Marron runs the liquor and suds part of the shop, keeping it feeling "cool and funky" like "controlled chaos." Instead of lining up inventory status quo, he displays bottles spread out, on pedestals and at different heights, like the collector he is.

"This is kind of like an extension of my liquor cabinet really. I have 450 bottles

SG+G'S JEFF MARRON ADDS SOME ROMANCE TO YOUR VALENTINE'S DAY WITH HIS LITTLE DARLING COCKTAIL.

LITTLE DARLING

1 1/2 oz. Absolut Citron
3/4 oz. freshly squeezed lemon juice
1/2 oz. simple syrup
1/3 oz. Grenadine
Cava

- Add Grenadine to a highball or Tom Collins glass and fill with ice.
- Add vodka, lemon and simple syrup to a shaker.
- Add ice and shake vigorously until well-chilled.
- Double strain over fresh ice in the highball glass.
- Top with Cava.
- Garnish with a lemon peel and maraschino cherry.





Jeff Marron and Mimi McLaughlin.
Photograph by Andrea Kennedy.

at home,” he says. “[The layout] makes people sit and stare at the shelf longer, and they’re always going to find a gem.”

Good design is one thing – and McLaughlin ensured that by tapping into her 30 years of experience in fashion and interior design – but the clincher at SG+G is their singular selection.

“We spend a lot of time cultivating a portfolio that’s about the smaller grower,” McLaughlin says of her wine inventory. “Yes, there will be recognizable brands here, but we intersperse them mostly with things that you won’t find anywhere else.”

Off-the-beaten path Italians are one of their strong suits, McLaughlin says, like Claudio Mariotto’s Pitasso, which comes from the ancient Timorasso vines in the Piedmont region. The winemaker has been awarded nationally for his eco-friendly practices.

“And we have a really, really kick-ass Pinot Noir section,” McLaughlin says. “We pride ourselves on that.”

Marron calls out Arterberry Maresh Juliard Vineyard Pinot Noir, Lioco Hirsch Vineyard Pinot Noir and Handley Cellars Anderson Valley Estate Pinot Noir as winning “brands you’d be hard-pressed to find somewhere else.”

Just as their inventory can be hard to find, so are couples who manage to work together – and still finish each other’s sentences – like Marron and McLaughlin do.

“Working together always impacts a relationship,” she says. “We’ve worked really hard to try and keep the relationship on solid ground.”

Their story begins not-too-distant from where there are now – working in the beverage industry.

“You tell it better than I do,” Marron nods to McLaughlin.

She obliges: McLaughlin was running

the wine program at Bill Taibe’s leFarm in Westport. (She developed an interest in wine collecting while working fashion and later took sommelier courses.) One fateful day in 2009, in walks Marron, who worked for Drinks Unlimited at the time, on a run with a liquor rep. As many 21st-century romances go, a matchmaking mutual Facebook friend got the ball rolling.

“I texted the friend we had in common and said, ‘Oh, he’s really cute,’” McLaughlin says. “And I guess he did the same.”

With shared passions from wine to antiques, the match practically made itself. The following year, they took the leap – into business.

“I knew this place was available and we decided, well, romance and business make a lot of sense,” McLaughlin says, glancing at Marron as the two erupt in laughter.

Though her cup of sarcasm runneth over, the two can’t deny their extraordinary shared experience of transforming Westport’s former Liquor Depot into a bona fide beverage boutique.

“We did this together,” McLaughlin says. “We each brought all of our talents to this store. You can see every part of us here.”

Marron adds that “our strengths complement the other’s weaknesses. It’s important to know that. I’m not going to pretend to be the wine expert when I’m the spirits guy. I look to Mimi for her expertise in that field. If you don’t have that, you’re going to be a lopsided store, and we’re pretty well-rounded.”

Any other secrets to their success?

“Yeah,” McLaughlin says with a smile. “I like him.”

Saugatuck Grain + Grape is located at 40 Railroad Place in Westport. For more, visit saugatuckgrainandgrape.com or call (203) 557-9120. ■



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